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## Syllabus revision: a needs analysis Study

Dehnad, A., Bagherzadeh, R., Shoaleh Bigdeli \*, Hatami, K., Hosseini, F.

*Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Management and Medical Information, Iran University of Medical Sciences  
 Faculty Member, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Management and Medical Information, Iran University of Medical Sciences  
 Assistant Professor of Medical Education, Department of Medical Education, Faculty of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran,  
 Iran.*

*Faculty Member, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Management and Medical Information, Iran University of Medical Sciences  
 Department of Biostatistics, Faculty of Management and Medical Information, Iran University of Medical Sciences  
 Project Supported by Iran University of Medical Sciences Center for Educational Research in Medical Sciences  
 (CERMS)*

### Abstract

Needs analysis is an integral part of ESP courses for syllabus design, materials development, teaching and testing issues. Unfortunately there has been no formal research on needs analysis for postgraduate courses in the Ministry of Health in Iran (MOH). The recent approach to needs analysis, critical approach, is both descriptive and transformative in research method. It emphasizes on the importance of needs analysis by including different stakeholders including: teachers, students and administrators in this process which is a political/subjective activity.

This study conducted in 2009 was an attempt to revise the present syllabi of ESP postgraduate courses on the basis of critical approach to needs analysis. The total population of the study was 75 people consisting of

56 postgraduate students, 10 graduates, four heads of departments, four ESP instructors and one executive manager at MOH. Ethical and demographic forms as well as a comprehensive questionnaire and a form of semi-structured interview were the instruments of the study. The questionnaire was based on Likert Scale which was then analyzed through SPSS. The result of the study showed a discrepancy between what the students expressed as their needs and what is actually in the syllabus prescribed by the MOH.

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### 1. Introduction

Since 1960s, ESP has grown to become an important and distinct area in the field of English Language Teaching. This growth shows an increasing need of learners to use English in their specific fields such as science, technology, medicine, business, etc. ESP, which is a learner-centered approach, is characterized by two features: special attention to learners' needs and inclusion of special content or text in activities. Needs analysis is an integral part of any ESP course that is used for developing materials, designing syllabus and determining teaching methods. Although there are different ideas about needs analysis, no one denies its importance in ESP courses.

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Shoaleh Bigdeli. Tel.: +9821 88058607; fax: +9821 88058607, 1449614535, PO Box 15875-6171.

E-mail address: [shobi@iums.ac.ir](mailto:shobi@iums.ac.ir); [shb555@yahoo.com](mailto:shb555@yahoo.com)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have commented that what distinguishes general English from ESP course is not the "existence of need as such but rather an awareness of the need"(p.53). This awareness will have an influence on the content of the course although it might seem that ESP is primarily characterized by its content which is in fact secondary to needs analysis. Emphasizing the role of needs analysis, Jordan (1997) has explained that in the process of needs analysis one should include, "the sponsors, the subject specialists, the language course designers and teachers and students"(p.22).

There are different approaches to needs analysis, the first one is Target Situation Analysis which could best be exemplified by the model presented by Munby (1978) who provided a detailed profile of the students' language needs. The main problem with this model is that it collects data about the learner not from the learners. The next approach to needs analysis is Present Situation Analysis which is learner-centered and collects information from the learners by the means of questionnaires or interviews. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have argued that the model, by focusing on learners, appears to neglect the role of society while needs should be determined by a negotiation between society and individual stake-holders. They have introduced an approach called learning-centered by which the needs are divided into necessities, lacks and wants. Necessities are what learners must know in order to communicate efficiently in teaching language use situation. Lacks refer to what learners already know and which part of the necessities they lack. What the students want are also part of the needs because ignoring the learners' want might lead to their demotivation in the course of learning.

There are other approaches like strategy analysis and means analysis. In the former approach advocated by Nunan (1988), the focus of the analysis is on the methodology applied to effectively implemented language programs while the latter approach attempts to adjust language courses to local situations.

Duddey- Evans and St. John (1998) have pointed out that needs analysis is the process of establishing the *what* and *how* of a course. They distinguish between two types of needs; objective needs which are derived from facts by outsiders and subjective needs which are derived from cognitive and affective factors by insiders of a community. They commented on the existing approaches to needs analysis as a more recent approach to need analysis is critical needs analysis which is both descriptive and transformative. It is descriptive for providing a list of learners' needs from the point of view of students, ESP teachers, heads of departments and policy makers. It is also transformative because it provides suggestions for changes in the content, materials, and teaching methods (Pennycook, 1989; Benesch, 1996). This approach to needs analysis includes all stakeholders in the process of needs analysis and tries to meet the needs expressed by different stakeholders while focusing on the needs of the learners.

In spite of the increasing concern about critical approach to needs analysis and its role in ESP curriculum design; there have been a few research studies in the context of ESP and in the setting of a developing country like Iran. Considering the few research studies in an ESP context globally and lack of a systematic and documented research studies locally in Iran, this research , which is an attempt to conduct a needs analysis for the purpose of curriculum design at the post graduate level, implements the critical approach to needs analysis. The results of this research might be useful for curriculum design and for revealing the advantages and disadvantages of the critical approach to needs analysis.

After reviewing the documents in the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME) in Iran and interviewing the heads of educational departments in the faculty of Management and Medical Information, it was found that no formal research has been conducted on needs analysis for postgraduate courses. In fact, educational needs have been determined by the heads of educational departments and policy makers at MOHME while English instructors and the learners have not been involved in this process. As a consequence the following problems have emerged:

1. Lack of a formal and approved program in the committee responsible for the development of course plan, has led the heads of educational departments to decide about the content of the post-graduate courses according to their personal experiences or preferences and exclude the idea of ESP instructors and learners. Therefore English courses are not provided harmoniously in different disciplines, for example, English is considered to be a prerequisite for one PhD discipline while the same course is presented as the requisite course for another PhD discipline.

2. Lack of coordination between English courses and the learners' real needs causes disinterest and consequently a downward trend in learning among the learners and finally a rapid decline in the quality of education.

The purpose of this study is to revise syllabi of English language courses of different post graduate disciplines through needs analysis and make suggestions for changes in course plans.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. *Participants*

This study was done in 2009 at the Faculty of Management and Medical Information, at Iran University of Medical Sciences and sponsored by Centre for Educational Research in Medical Education. Since it was the first formal research on needs analysis, it was decided to delimit the study to postgraduate level of the school of Management. The population of this study comprised 56 postgraduate students studying at the Faculty of Management and Medical Information of Iran University of Medical Sciences. There was no sample selection and all the students were included in the study. The age range of the participants was 22 – 40, 32 females and 24 males. 44 of these students were studying at Master's level and 12 of them were Ph.D. students. They were from different majors (table.1).

Table 1- *Frequency of participants with different majors*

Major	No.
Librarianship	9
Hospital Service Management	17
Health Economics	12
Health Information Management	9
Medical Records	9
Total	56

### 2.2. *Instruments*

The instrument of the study consisted of Ethical and demographic forms to get personal information and approval of the students for taking part in the study. A unique and comprehensive 50-item questionnaire including three main parts was developed. The first part aimed at extracting detailed information concerning students' needs as well as expectation on four skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening for/ in both academic and professional career. The second part tried to identify students' needs regarding educational facilities such as: internet, classroom environment, etc. The purpose of the third part was to identify the role of other stakeholders in the process of the needs analysis from the students' point of view.

This questionnaire, based on six-point Likert Scale, was checked by two faculty members for content validity; and, reliability was measured by test-retest. For the purpose of this paper only the first part of the administered questionnaire was analyzed and will be presented here.

A semi-structured interview was developed which asked who was responsible for determining the needs and what the real needs of the students are. The interview was conducted with heads of departments, graduate students and a high rank administrator at the Ministry of Health, the office of course development.

### 2.3 Statistical Procedure

The data collected from the questionnaires and the interviews were submitted to SPSS (version 16) for frequency.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Current post-graduate students' description of needs

#### 3.1.1. Reading skills

The results on the needs of the students to reading skills showed that post graduate students need reading skills for reading the journals and textbooks in their own field of study(52,7% and 48.7%), electronic letters(46.2%), reading graphs and tables(42.6%), and reading technical instructions for using instruments and equipment(42.5%).

#### 3.1.2. Listening skills

The results on listening skills showed that the students expect to learn listening skills for class participations (49.5%), and listening to lectures (46.3%).

#### 3.1.3. Writing skills

The results on writing skills showed that the students think that they need to learn writing skills for writing research papers to be published in foreign journals (47.1%), writing electronic letters (41.2%) and translating the related texts of their own field of study (45.1%).

#### 3.1.4. Speaking skills

The results of the needs analysis showed that the students think they need speaking skills for class participation (62%), taking exams related to speaking ability(50%), to present lectures in the class(48%) and interviews (42%).

### 3.2. ESP teachers' description of need

There was a general agreement among the five ESP teachers, teaching at the English department of the IUMS, that writing was of the prime importance for the post-graduate students studying at the Faculty of Management and Medical Information, because the students had to write abstracts and papers for publication. Moreover, they believed that reading is the second skill which should be focused on at post-graduate level at this school. Finally, these teachers stated that the students should then be provided with the opportunity to practice speaking and listening because they might participate in international seminars.

### 3.3. Head of departments' description of needs

Most of the head of the departments with the exception of the departments of Faculty of Management and Medical Information, stated that reading was the most important skills. Interestingly, these persons are those who determine course plans of different post – graduate disciplines at the MOHME.

### 3.4. Policy makers at MOHME's description of needs

The review of the course plan prescribed by MOHME indicated a diversity of emphasis on English courses in different disciplines, as for Medical Informatics at Master's level, the main focus was on reading, and writing, translation, and summary writing were the next priorities, respectively. Concerning Health Economics at Master's level, reading and translation skills were emphasized, respectively. For Medical Records' Master's level, the skills were prioritized as reading, speaking, listening and outline writing. As for Hospital administration at Masters level only reading was focused on. For Health Information Management PhD program reading and writing were mentioned as priorities respectively. The interview with the high ranking authority at the MOHME showed that he himself was not familiar with the process of needs analysis for determining course plan and as a convention the responsibility of determining course plan was given to the heads of the departments.

Name of the discipline	Credits	Type of course	Needs prescribed by the MOHME in priority	Needs described by head of departments in priority	Needs described by graduate students in priority	Needs described by current students in priority	Needs described by ESP teachers in priority
Medical informatics Master's degree	2	Technical English	1.Reading 2.Writing 3.Translation 4.Summary 5.Writing	1- Reading 2- Writing 3- Listening 4- Speaking	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1-Writing 2-Reading 3-Speaking 4-Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening
Biostatistics Master's degree	-	-	-	1- Reading 2- Writing 3- listening 4- Speaking	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.listening	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.reading 3.speaking 4.listening
Health Economics Master's degree	4	Pre-requisite	1.Reading 2.Translation	1- Reading 2- Writing 3- Listening 4- Speaking	1.Speaking 2.Listening 3.Writing 4.Reading	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening
Medical records Master's degree	4	Technical English	1.Reading 2.Speaking 3.Listening 4.Outline Writing	1- Reading 2- Writing 3- Listening 4- Speaking	1.speaking 2.Reading 3. Writing 4.Listening	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening
Hospital management Master's degree	4	Technical English	Reading	1- Writing 2- Reading 3- listening 4- Speaking	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening
Health Economics PhD	-	-	-	1- Reading 2- Writing 3-Listening 4- Speaking	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening
Health Information Management PhD	2	Pre-requisite	Reading and Writing	1-Writing 2- Reading 3- listening 4- Speaking	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1. Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening	1.Writing 2.Reading 3.Speaking 4.Listening

### 3.5. Graduate students 'description of needs

The findings indicated that 89% of the graduate students believed that writing was the most important skill followed by reading (60.7%), speaking (58.9%), and listening (40.7%).

The following table shows the description of needs stated by different stakeholders.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The learners of this study have expressed their real needs to writing skills, as the first need, followed by reading, speaking and listening. There is no match between what the graduate students, current students and ESP teachers described as the real needs of the post-graduate students and those stated by the heads of the departments and MOHME. On the other hand, the match between what MOHME has prescribed and those stated by the heads of the departments suggest that they share the same ideas. In fact, those prescribing the course plan at the MOHME are the heads of departments working at the committee of course development of the MOHME. The discrepancy between what students acknowledge as their needs and what is imposed on them might partly be responsible for the low quality of learning and lack of motivation among post-graduate students at this school. In addition, absence of an ESP teacher in the committee of course development at the MOHME appears to lead to course plans which do not seem to meet students' needs. What is suggested for this part of the study is integration of graduate students, ESP teachers and subject matter specialists in the committee of course development and inclusion of students' attitudes, needs and expectations by the use of a questionnaire.

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